“IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SOMETHING WORTH READING”: NARRATIVE, PLEASURE, AND IDEOLOGY IN THE POST-WAR METAFICTIONAL NOVEL

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By

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The act of narrating has ethical and political implications that often go unexplored in the realist novel. Metafictional texts foreground this problem of telling by referring to their construction, questioning the assumptions and ideology of their form. After WWII, recognition of the ideological power of narrative triggered a crisis in representation. The metafictional novel represents one response to the following questions: how does one write when logic, language, and realist representation can no longer be taken for granted? How can artistic forms reflect postwar conditions of existence, and how can they overcome the problems of ideology inherent in realist representation? In this project, I examine the attempts of two authors writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to overcome these problems of realist representation in the novel. Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov write in two very different styles that both seek to answer some of the same questions. The effects of these two styles—causing the reader to notice and question his own reading practice, and requiring him to become an active creator of the text’s meaning—work on the reader in the same way. By calling attention to their constructedness and contingency, these metafictional texts attempt to push the limits of what is possible in the form of the novel. In order to accomplish this, I explore the role
that textual pleasure plays in the formation of subject identification in the realist novel, and how this process of identification is challenged in the metafictional text.
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**INTRODUCTION**

Ideologies naturalize representation...they present constructed and disputable meanings as if they were hardly meanings at all, but, rather, forms inherent in the world-out-there which the observer is privileged to intuit directly...an ideology is a set of limits to discourse; a set of resistances, repetitions, kinds of circularity. It is that which closes speech against consciousness of itself as production, as process, as practice, as subsistence and contingency.

—TJ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*.

In this project, I propose a theory of metafiction that aims to redirect attention to a text’s “consciousness of itself as production.” The act of narrating, of telling a story, has ethical and political implications that often go unexplored in the realist novel. Metafictional texts foreground this problem of telling, by referring to their own construction as a means of questioning the limits, assumptions, and ideology of their form. The metafictional novel has existed as long as the novel itself, but in the period following the Second World War, a significant number of novels that foreground their constructed status began to threaten the long-standing dominance of literary realism. The horror of a worldwide war, and the mechanized terrors of a nightmare of industrial efficiency and scientific racism and the technological ability to destroy the world with the push of a button, provoked authors and readers to question the power of ideologies contained
in accepted narratives of the stories a society tells itself. This recognition of the ideological power of narrative and its potential for coercion triggered a crisis in representation throughout Western art and literature. The metafictional novel represents one potential response to the questions posed by Theodor Adorno in his 1962 essay “Commitment”: how does one write in a world in which logic, language—and therefore realist representation—can no longer be taken for granted? How can artistic and literary forms reflect the conditions of existence in a post-war capitalist world, and how can they overcome the problems of ideology inherent in realist representation?

In this project, I examine the attempts of two authors writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a period that straddles the line traditionally drawn between modernism and postmodernism, to overcome these problems of realist representation in the novel. While the drive to question conventions of narrative is not necessarily a conscious reaction to social upheavals of the Second World War, it represents a cultural impulse specific to its place and time. Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov write in two very different styles that both seek to answer some of the same questions. The effects of these two styles—causing the reader to notice and question his own reading practice, and requiring him to become an active creator of the text’s meaning—work on the reader in the same way. The texts by Beckett and Nabokov that I consider here share a tendency, perhaps a compulsion, to examine their own fictiveness by foregrounding conventions of traditional narrative—conventions that they constantly violate—and the voices in which their stories are told. By calling attention to their constructedness and contingency, these metafictional texts attempt to push the limits of what is possible in the form of
the novel. By breaking down conventions of narrative progression and causality and splitting apart the unified, authoritative voice of the author-narrator, Samuel Beckett attempts to represent the debased state of reality and the individual in post-war existence. If traditional forms of textual pleasure found in identification and closure are suspect—or no longer possible—Beckett challenges the reader to find a way to go on. In his novels *Lolita* and *Ada, or Ardor*, Vladimir Nabokov uses the conventions of realist narrative to explore the way that these conventions manipulate the reader’s emotional response, calling attention to the coercive powers of identification and closure.

Ideological critiques of narrative style, such as those proposed by Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, and their Frankfurt School contemporaries, tend to distinguish between the anti-realist text that defies the reader’s desire for narrative closure, disallowing what we might call *textual pleasure*, and the realist text that disguises its constructed nature to allow subject identification, compelling the reader’s irrational emotional investment. This philosophy of art required an anti-realist form stripped of artifice and most kinds of textual pleasure. I aim to complicate the dichotomy between the “pleasurable” realist text that hides its constructed status to allow subject identification and the catharsis found in narrative closure, and the “political” text that foregrounds its constructed nature in order to elicit an intellectual response in its audience. In order to accomplish this, I will explore the role that textual pleasure plays in the formation of subject identification in the realist novel, and how this process of identification is challenged in the metafictional text. By calling attention to the process in the realist novel that creates textual
pleasure, Vladimir Nabokov allows the reader to recognize and resist the text’s attempt to manipulate his emotional response.

Many studies of the politics of narration focus on the specific characteristics of a character-narrator—his maleness, or whiteness, or upper-class status—that cause him to make problematic assumptions about the homogeneity of his audience and its values. My analysis instead examines what a form of narration, at a structural level, says about the way that authority operates, both within a text and in society: through the exclusion of other voices. Similarly, the philosophy expressed by a text’s style of narrative and narration communicates not only a worldview of logic and meaning, as Adorno argues, but also a philosophy of interpretation and authority. By questioning the authority of a narrative voice that presents itself as representative of an unfiltered authorial consciousness, rather than a text created by a narrator who is aware he is narrating and conscious of his power over the reader, I examine the way that ideology operates by presenting itself as always-existing and “natural,” rather than constructed. My ultimate goal for this project is, firstly, to explain how the voices that tell us stories convince us to agree with them by making the act of identifying pleasurable. Secondly, I seek to theorize a concept of textual pleasure in the metafictional novel that challenges the conception of textual pleasure as a coercive force. If, as I discuss below, textual pleasure in the realist novel requires the reader to identify himself within prevailing ideologies, how can experimental narrative structures that create space for the reader’s interpretative processes allow him to imagine alternatives?
In his essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes situates the novel socially and historically, equating the rise of the form with the growing dominance of 18th century ideals such as empiricism, rationalism, and the prestige of the individual. He identifies the modern novel, with its emphasis on the individual (through standards of psychological realism and character development that leads to self-realization and actualization) as “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author” (143). In this analogy, the relationship of the Author-creator to a text (and its reader) is as God is to human or as a father is to a child—the source of ultimate authority. However, once the author is dethroned from his place of authority, the reader is restored as the ultimate source of meaning. Barthes states: “Refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ ultimate meaning,” what Barthes calls “the ‘message’ of the Author-God,” to a text, “liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.” Removing the ultimate authority of the author also opens a text up to a multitude of possible meanings and interpretations: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147).

Linda Hutcheon examines the problem of the closed, finite nature of the realist text in her book, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, arguing that a primary function of metafiction is to make the reader a creator of meaning on par with the author, opening the text to
a multiplicity of meanings through the reader’s interpretative process. Hutcheon defines
metafiction as “fiction about fiction,” meaning “fiction that includes within itself a commentary
on its own narrative or linguistic identity” (1). The metafictional novel foregrounds the linguistic
and narrative structures used to create meaning in the realist novel. Hutcheon describes
metafiction as “process made visible” (6), recalling Clark’s definition of ideology as “that which
closes speech against consciousness of itself...as process.” While the metafictional novel has
existed as long as the novel itself—Robert Alter identifies Cervantes as the originator of both the
realist novel and its metafictional parody—Hutcheon’s analysis focuses on a mid-to late-
twentieth century form of metafiction that she calls “metafictional narcissism.” Hutcheon
describes the difference between a form of traditional metafiction spanning the years from Sterne
to Joyce, and this newer form:

the “expressionistic” novel focuses on its own idea; the main interest is in the writing
process and its product. In...metafictional narcissism, this focus does not shift, so much
as broaden, to include a parallel process of equal importance to the text’s actualization—
that of reading....As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words,
so the reader—from the same words—manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is
as much his creation as it is the novelist’s. This near equation of the acts of reading and
writing is one of the concerns that sets modern metafiction apart from previous novelistic
self-consciousness. (27)

The contemporary metafictions Hutcheon describes focus on the act of interpretation, giving the
reader a nearly equal voice in creating meaning. As Hutcheon puts it, these metafictions “Grant
or demand of the reader, his *freedom,*” recalling Barthes’ distinction in “From Work to Text” between reading as consumption and reading as play.

Hutcheon identifies two major forms of metafiction: linguistic and diegetic. Characteristics of linguistic metafictionality include a parodic play with a style of writing, or pastiche; a text’s awareness of itself as a written or printed document consisting of words, such as play with conventions of printing: footnotes, commentary, etc.; and wordplay, such as puns and anagrams (99-101). Metafiction in the diegetic mode includes the use of *mise en abyme,* allegory, metaphor, or microcosm to shift the focus of the text “from ‘fiction’ to ‘narration’ by either making the ‘narration’ into the very substance of the novel’s content, or by undermining the traditional coherence of the ‘fiction’ itself” (28). In the diegetic mode, the reader is aware that in reading, he is actively creating a fictional universe. Hutcheon describes the two forms: “In diegetic narcissism, the text displays itself as narrative, as the gradual building of a fictive universe complete with character and action. In the linguistic mode, however, the text would actually show its building blocks— the very language whose referents serve to construct that imaginative world” (29). While both of the authors I consider here use many, if not all, of the characteristics Hutcheon identifies as characteristics of the metafiction, the dominant metafictional mode in Beckett’s writing is linguistic. For Nabokov, it is diegetic. Beckett’s metafictions reveal the discrete elements that create literary meaning: character, plot, dialogue, and narration, encouraging the reader to examine how each component functions with the others to create a kind of narrative language. The metatextual elements in Nabokov’s work examine
how narrative operates on the reader, and the ways in which all fictions are connected in a social framework.

**IDEOLOGY, IDENTIFICATION, AND PLEASURE**

These fictional structures that focus on a text’s sense of itself “as process” are important to examine here, as the operations of pleasure in the realist text require that the reader remain unaware of this process. I will examine here two forms of textual pleasure: the pleasure found in the reader’s process of identifying with a character, and the pleasure found in narrative closure.

The process by which a reader is made to “lose himself” in identification with a character and a narrative can be elucidated by the concept of *suture* found in film studies. I will turn to the discussion on suture to examine how identification functions, and how textual pleasure drives this identification. According to the poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories that come together to examine the concept of suture, narrative signification operates through the illusion that no author or voice that “speaks” the text—the text is instead seen to be its own articulation. As Kaja Silverman explains in *The Subject of Semiotics*, “the level of enunciation remains veiled from the viewing subject’s scrutiny, which is entirely absorbed within the level of the fiction; the subject of the speech seems to be the speaking subject” (202). In order to facilitate suture, the classic realist text must at all costs conceal from the subject the passivity of its position, and this necessitates the denial of a reality outside the fiction. The coherence of the classic text relies upon the subject’s willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to “stand in” for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. As Silverman
explains, “The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ or ‘That’s what I see’” (205). In the literary model, “seeing” would be analogous to “perceiving.” In the operations of literary suture, the subject/reader would demonstrate his identification with a text by saying “That’s what I perceive.” Silverman emphasizes the domineering nature of the system of suture: “This definition of a discursive position for the viewing subject…necessitates not only its loss of being, but the repudiation of alternative discourses, is one of the aims of the system of suture” (205-206).

The study of suture relies upon Althusser’s concept of ideology as the way in which a subject learns to recognize itself in contemporary discourses:

what…is…ideology if not simply the “familiar,” “well known,” transparent myths in which a society or an age can recognize itself (but not know itself), the mirror it looks into for self-recognition, precisely the mirror it must break if it is to know itself?¹ What is the ideology of a society or a period if it is not that society’s or period’s consciousness of itself, that is, an immediate material which spontaneously implies, looks for and naturally finds its form in the consciousness of self living the totality of its world in the transparency of its own myths? (144)

In the passage above, Althusser describes the process through which the subject constantly rediscovers itself, in the same ideological representations through which it first came to know

¹ To “break” the mirror would not be to transcend ideology — which Althusser says is impossible — but rather, to become aware of its operations. However, the pleasures found in identification require that the subject not be made aware of these operations.
itself. We recognize ourselves in the ideologies that seem to us to be obvious or unquestionable, in that they represent and reinforce our worldview. In the same way, as readers, we recognize ourselves in stories that we perceive to be, at some level, true. We recognize ourselves in stories that represent and reinforce our worldview, and this feeling of recognition—or identification—is pleasurable. As an adolescent, I found great pleasure in reading *Jane Eyre*, because it reinforced my belief that poor, plain, yet independent and strong women would triumph over the injustices to which they are subjected. And by the same token, the worldviews reinforced by the books we read were, in fact, created by the ideological climate in which the realist novel came to thrive. As Silverman explains, “The system of suture functions not only to constantly re-interpellate the viewing subject into the same discursive positions, thereby giving that subject the illusion of a stable and continuous identity, but to re-articulate the existing symbolic order in ideologically orthodox ways” (221).

The second form of textual pleasure, that found in narrative closure, represents the pleasure of the resolution of tension. Narrative signification depends on the moment of unpleasure where the subject perceives that something is lacking. As Silverman explains: “A complex signifying chain is introduced in place of the lack which can never be made good, suturing over the wound of castration with narrative. However, it is only by inflicting the wound to begin with that the viewing subject can be made to want the restorative of meaning and narrative” (204). The reader is made to desire narrative closure when he perceives that something is being withheld from him. He is shown only enough to know that there is more, and
to want that “more” to be disclosed. This “lack,” in Lacanian discourse, is analogous to Freud’s concept of the pleasure principle. According to Freud, the impulse to avoid unpleasure—that is, to avoid tension—governs all psychic activity. For Freud, pleasure represents the absence of unpleasure, a state in which all tensions are resolved. The pleasure found in the resolution of narrative closure represents this lack of tension. I will examine this form of textual pleasure more closely in my analysis of Nabokov’s *Lolita* in an upcoming chapter.

One of the primary theorists of textual pleasure, Roland Barthes, attempts to unravel the complex process by which such pleasures are created in his equally complex essay, *The Pleasure of the Text*. The text, like the essay under discussion here, must be read poetically, with a mind open to the multiplicity of possible meanings in each word and to the play of language. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes asks the question, *what is it we do when we enjoy a text?* To attempt to answer this difficult question, he focuses on the act of reading:

Imagine someone…who abolishes within himself all barriers…who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity…Such a man would be the mockery of society…

Now this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure. Thus the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*: the text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel. (3-4)

While Barthes’ point seems to be that such an amorphous, unruly thing as pleasure cannot fully be theorized in a traditional way, he makes some important observations about the nature of textual pleasure.
In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes identifies two different forms of pleasure, the first of which is *plaisir*, or contentment. The second form of pleasure, *jouissance*, is translated in most English versions of the essay, including the one I quote below, as *bliss*, but I find Jonathan Culler’s translation of *ecstasy* to be more useful. The “text of pleasure” (*plaisir*) represents the consistency of selfhood: “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading”—this is what Barthes calls elsewhere the readerly text. But the text of *jouissance* (ecstasy) represents a loss of the sense of selfhood found in the text of pleasure:

the text that imposes a state of loss, that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettle the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings him to a crisis in his relation with language. Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field…simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture…and in the destruction of that culture…he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse. (14)

Barthes frequently seems to suggest that textual pleasure operates in moments where forms of *plaisir* and *jouissance* meet. Assertions such as “Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic, it is the gap between them that becomes so…it is not violence that impresses pleasure; destruction does not interest it; what it desires is the site of a loss, a seam, a cut, a deflation, the *dissolve* that seizes the reader at the moment of ecstasy” (7) imply that textual pleasure depends on the
possibility of finding ecstatic moments in comfortable, readerly texts, or else in making the
ecstatic, writerly text readable enough that its violent, disruptive effects can be felt.

The forms of metafictionality that I examine in the following chapters include various
strategies that both Beckett and Nabokov use to break down conventions of the realist novel in
ways that call the reader’s attention to the act of textual interpretation, and through it, the process
by which textual pleasure is created. These methods include, in all of the texts to follow,
reference to act of writing the text, demonstrating the act of invention inherent in the
construction of a narrative. The fictional “authors” of each of these works struggle with the act
writing as an act of remembering, and with remembering as a form of storytelling. They agonize
over the effort to adequately express themselves in words, and with their sense of control over
their stories and, thus, their readers. Beckett’s linguistic metafictions dismantle traditional
structures of character, plot, and narratorial voice, in order to open up the closed system of
signification and reveal the workings of conventional narrative structure. References to other
texts that exist outside the world of the novel violate the ontology of the fictional universe,
revealing the manner in which generic expectations and learned modes of reading shape the
reader’s emotional response to a narrative, which in turn influence his ethical and moral
judgments. Nabokov’s fictional authors reveal the act of manipulation inherent in the creation of
narrative that allows it to influence our reading practice, facilitating the identification and closure
that we as readers so desire.
CHAPTER I

“TO BE A LITTLE LESS, IN THE END”: BECKETT’S THREE NOVELS AS “NEGATIVE EPIC”

I would like to turn now to the first of my major questions: How can the metafiction attempt to represent the state of humanity in the post-war era, if the forms of pleasure in realist fiction, with its sense of progression and the promise of resolution, no longer represent the human experience? What forms of textual pleasure are possible in a world which seems to be dissolving rather than evolving?

Adorno’s essay “Commitment” was written in 1962, the year of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Milgram experiment at Yale. Questions of authority, obedience, and ideology were prevalent as the world processed the shock of the Holocaust, asking how such a thing could happen in a world that was supposed to be just and logical. While Adorno and his Frankfurt School contemporaries are writing about the politics of aesthetics and representation, implicit in their work are larger questions: What forces compelled a society to remain complicit in an act of evil and madness perpetrated against their fellow citizens? How were ideologies that allowed people to believe that they were acting in the best interests of themselves, their families, and their nation developed and perpetuated? What role does textual pleasure play in the perpetuation of ideologies? Adorno and his interlocutors, such as Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács, recognized the ability of narrative and representation, and the pleasures they provide, to create and perpetuate social values and beliefs. They differed, however, on the way to create art that
adequately reflected modern capitalist society in the aftermath of the great World Wars. The ideal form of this art would not only represent what they saw as the changed state of reality in the post-war era, but it would reflect a consciousness, in its form, of its own potential for ideological influence.

In “Commitment,” Adorno outlines a dichotomy between “autonomous” and “committed” art, stating that “A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle past-time for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political…For autonomous works of art, however, such considerations, and the conception of art which underlies them, are themselves the spiritual catastrophe of which the committed keep warning” (177). He sets Beckett’s *Endgame* up against Sartre’s *No Exit* as two attempts to express the absurd, hopeless condition of humanity in the postwar world. According to Adorno, the realist form Sartre uses to make his argument, with its respect for conventions of plot, character, and narrative, undermines his claim of an absurd, irrational world. *Endgame*, unlike *No Exit*, successfully communicates the dehumanizing nature of post-war capitalist society because the form of the work, not merely its content, expresses its worldview. Adorno states that a message of social change is best expressed through “autonomous” art, meaning seemingly apolitical works whose form expresses their philosophy of reality. For Adorno, these are works which “swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities” (179). These works, which call into question existing social and political structures by challenging the expression of a logical universe inherent in realist
systems of representation, better express the inhumanity of industrialized capitalist society than overtly political works that condemn such structures while adhering to conventions of realism. As such, only the autonomous work of art can truly be the site of resistance.

In his essay “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” Adorno demonstrates that conventional narrative implies an ultimate, cosmic meaning in the world. He claims that the individual, as depicted in realist novel, no longer exists in post-war capitalist society:

The identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity— and that life was the only thing that made the narrator’s stance possible— has disintegrated…For telling a story means having something special to say, and that is precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness…the narrator’s implicit claim that the course of the world is still essentially one of individuation, that the individual with his impulses and feelings is still the equal of fate, that the inner person is still directly capable of something, is ideological in itself.

(31)

Important contemporary novels are “negative epics”: “They are testimonials to a state of affairs which the individual liquidates himself, a state of affairs which converges with the pre-individual situation that once seemed to guarantee a world replete with meaning…There is no modern work of art worth anything that does not delight in dissonance and release” (35).

When read together, Beckett’s Three Novels form a version of Adorno’s “negative epic,” through their breakdown of narrative progression, causality, and the authoritative voice of the
author-narrator. The lack of narrative progression is visible both at the level of each individual novel and when the three are interpreted together as one text. The narrative in \textit{Molloy} has elements of an epic journey or the quest of the Bildungsroman—perhaps the most representative genre of the novel as an art form which, itself, represents the bourgeois era; when, as W. H. Bruford put it, “The culture of the individual (Bildung) has become a substitute for salvation” (qtd in Castle, 34) — but the breakdown of progression is visible as characters devolve, rather than develop. Rather than providing for the reader the pleasure found in narrative closure, as the protagonist achieves salvation or enlightened self-understanding, the narrating “I” devolves as the novel ends where it began. As Molloy describes it: “The fact is, it seems, that the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, than the creature you were in the beginning, and the middle” (28). This idea of being \textit{less} by a story’s end is a challenge to a concept of the novel as an art form that represents the development and growth of the bourgeois individual.

Instead of the process of acculturation that occurs in the Bildungsroman, in which an individual experiences social, educational, and moral development that allow him to achieve status as a proper member of society, Molloy’s journey leads to the dissolution of his already threadbare identity. Molloy encounters the authority that would, in the Bildungsroman, make him a member of society, in a scene similar to the one Althusser will later use to explain how ideology “hails” the subject. Molloy is “hailed” (16) by a policeman, who requests formal proof of Molloy’s identity by asking to see his “papers.” Molloy is confused by the request and presents the officer with the only “papers” in his possession: bits of newspaper he carries to wipe
himself after a bowel movement. In this act, Molloy equates his identity with his excrement. As
he cannot determine who he is, Molloy identifies himself to the police officer through what he is
not—the waste that has left his body, and the traces he has left on paper.

Molloy lacks a sense of his own identity because he cannot recall the events that have
brought him to his current state, and therefore he cannot narrate his own story. His inability to
create a narrative for his life stems from his troubles with language. Molloy’s attempts to give
himself an identity are stymied by his inability to determine, and hold onto, an individual name:
“And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate” (27).
He struggles to assign a specific referent to signifiers that contain a plurality of possible
meanings: “All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome
little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata
of the dead” (27). Molloy sees that words are “dead” as soon as they are written, spoken, or
fixed with meaning. In attempting to find a name for himself, and in narrating his own story,
Molloy destroys his identity even as he creates it. The act of narration creates the narrator, who
cannot exist outside of his text. In attempting to narrate, in the present, events that occurred in
the past, Molloy cannot rely on a previous conception of who he may be; he rather discovers and
forgets himself simultaneously. Even the novel’s title has no definite referent. There is no
definitive textual evidence that “Molloy” is the narrator’s name—it is a word he seems to
remember in his panicked state. The title could, then, be read as a search for identity, for a word
to call one’s self, or else as a search for meaning in both a narrative and a world that are
incomprehensible.
The narrative, like Molloy’s journey, is circular rather than straightforward, precluding any promise of narrative closure. Molloy’s inability to conceive of a plan or a motivation leads him on a circuitous journey: “All roads were right for me, a wrong road was an event, for me” (26). Molloy seems to believe that a linear path is not truly possible: “And I have heard… when a man in a forest thinks he is going forward in a straight line, in reality he is going in a circle, I did my best to go in a circle, hoping in this way to go in a straight line,” and while this trick does not allow him to go in a straight line, at least, he says, “I did not go in a circle, and that was something” (79). In this manner, he retraces his path, and the reader circles with him through his narrative. Like Molloy’s bicycle, which lacks a chain and yet somehow travels onward, there is no clear motivation pushing the characters, or the text, forward. Throughout the novel, endings are juxtaposed with beginnings. Birth is equated with both death and excrement, while death is described as a kind of birth. These juxtapositions imply that endings are not final, and in the Beckettian universe, narrative closure is unattainable. Molloy has elements of an epic journey or quest narrative, but the characters’ goals cannot be reached or even known. As Molloy searches, ostensibly, for his mother, Moran searches for Molloy, but neither seems to know exactly why they continue on their respective quests. Just as Molloy’s travels have no end, his actions never allow him to reach his goals, when he is able to remember what they are: “And of myself, all my life, I think I had been going to my mother, with the purpose of establishing our relations on a less precarious footing. And when I was with her, and I often succeeded, I left her without having done anything. And when I was no longer with her I was again on my way to
her, hoping to do better next time” (81). He exists in a perpetual state of trying without achieving, searching without finding, and traveling, but never arriving.

Molloy lacks an understanding of his journey, his narrative, and his identity because he is unable to determine causation. He fails to determine motivations for his own actions and the events of the narrative. In the opening lines of the novel, Molloy is in his mother’s room. He doesn’t know how he got there, although his stated goal throughout the days or years his narrative was to find his mother. The sole defining characteristic of Molloy’s character is his inability—or refusal—to believe that any sequence of events is causally connected. He frequently makes assumptions with no rational basis, except that he cannot guarantee that such an event has not taken place—upon discovering that his beard has been cut, he remarks, “Perhaps they had dyed it too, I had no proof that they had not” (34). Moran, on the other hand, sees causal relationships where none exist. His narration demonstrates an obsession with order and causality, as he attempts to attribute reasons to the random events of his narrative. Moran’s character functions as a parody of rationalism, as Moran’s carefully thought-out plans to find Molloy unravel as his rational mind does. The lack of causation seen in Molloy also represents the absence of narrative progress that, to the reader, ultimately promises to lead to closure, as seen in Moran’s thwarted search for Molloy.

At the metatextual level, the many parallels between the novel’s two sections—both parts tell stories of long bicycle trips in search of a person they never find, both narrators are physically incapacitated in a way that becomes worse as the narrative progresses, both endure long stays in a forest, each commits murder, both finally arrive at their destinations, where reader
finds them at their respective “beginnings,” a vaguely defined other demands an account of the experience, which the reader assumes is the text he has just read—suggest many possible interpretations of the relationship between the two sections of the text. However, a causal relationship can no more be determined here than in Molloy’s story. Various hypotheses propose that Moran becomes Molloy after the former has undergone a breakdown; that Molloy symbolically represents Moran’s repressed unconscious; that both characters are the split personalities of a schizophrenic—but none of these interpretations can be definitively proven by textual evidence. This question of the relationship between the two narratives creates for the reader a problem of interpretation: Do these two texts that appear to be intimately tied together have any causal relation at all, or are they simply two similar stories? By what criteria can the reader make such a determination? As Brian Richardson observes, what is at stake here is nothing less than “the definition of narrative” (133). The correlation of cause and effect is one of the basic elements that makes a story into a plot, as in the example E.M. Forster uses in *Aspects of the Novel*: “We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it…If [the death of the queen] is in a story we say ‘and then?’ If it is in a plot we ask ‘why?’” (94-94). The cause-and-effect relationship so important in narrative also creates one of its ideological functions. By positing a cause for the state of a society, a narrative about that society proposes a course of action. To return to my example from earlier in this chapter, the official ideology of the German Third
Reich stated that certain types of sub-humans were the cause of the nation’s social and economic problems, therefore, the proper course of action was to rid the society of its problems by eliminating their cause.

The disappearance of plot in any traditional sense in Beckett’s *Three Novels* is also the progressive dissolution of the concept of character. *Molloy* begins with the semblance of individuated characters (who may or may not actually be two different people), the rough sketch of a recognizable setting, and the barest elements of a plot. As the text progresses (or devolves) into *Malone Dies*, the various “characters”—Lambert, Saposcat, who eventually becomes Macmann—are admitted to be the speaker’s own inventions, and even the name Malone is only “what I am called now” (216). The plot of *Malone Dies* is not the events that happen to the characters, it is the author’s act of invention. The major plot points are when the narrator drops his exercise-book or seems to drift off to sleep, and the moment of greatest narrative tension occurs when Malone wonders whether his pencil might run out before his story is finished.

This devolution of character and narrator ultimately represents the dissolution of the author, for whom the first-person narrator stands in. Over the course of the three texts, Beckett demonstrates a literal depiction of what Barthes will later call “the death of the author.” Each narrator is, in James Phelan’s terms, a self-conscious authorial narrator, although their levels of aesthetic control vary greatly. Molloy writes at the command of an unseen master: “It was he told me I’d begun all wrong, that I should have begun differently…I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that? Here’s my beginning. Because they’re keeping it apparently. I took a lot of trouble with it…It was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas
now it’s nearly the end” (4). This passage is revealed, upon a second reading, to be a preamble, written at the instruction of an unseen supervisor, to make up for deficiencies in the body of his report. The action of the report commences, suddenly and without transition, from Molloy’s complaint. The question the reader must ask: At what point in the chronology of the text must this passage have been written? After the end of Part I, or Part II? The “beginning” of the novel is the end of the story and the “beginning” the narrator refers to is a false beginning, already a repetition, something that has already happened viewed in retrospect. Molloy has hardly begun, and yet the structure of the novel is already collapsing in on itself.

In various ways, the narrators of each of the novels call attention to the acts of invention and selection inherent in the telling of a story, thereby demonstrating the text’s authority to be contingent on the person of the author. Molloy explains gaps and inconsistencies in his story: “And if I failed to mention this detail in its proper place, it is because you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so” (36)—and yet he chooses indiscriminately, narrating an episode of sucking on stones over five unbroken pages, but refusing to narrate a stretch of several years: “And as to saying what became of me, and where I went, in the months and perhaps the years that followed, no” (63). Moran takes advantage of his power as narrator to disavow any knowledge of the death of a man he is quarreling with mere words before: “I do not know what happened there. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp. I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading” (145). The next narrator, Malone, continually comments on his own
act of writing and telling a story. As a narrator, his conviction falters at times, but Malone’s frequent interruptions and revisions are continual manifestations of authorial presence. His edits and interjections remind the reader that his work is inchoate, and his indecision and self-criticism portray in real time the struggles that plague authorship. Instead of creating a dialogue or conversation, Beckett’s narrators construct themselves exclusively from their own words, creating themselves and each other from the things they stories they tell in solitude. As the self is a product of language, problems of self-identity and consciousness are tied to problems of language. Beckett’s prose style dramatizes the struggle to articulate the self in a language learned from others.

The narrator, or narrators, in each of the three novels, perform what Richardson calls *denarration*—“a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given” (87). These denarrated episodes call attention to the performative nature of the articulation of a fictional world. Richardson demonstrates that denarration functions as a play between narrative creation and destruction, revealing the ontological frailty of fiction: at any point, the narrator can contradict what has been written, transforming the entire relationship between events and the way they are interpreted (94). At the end of his report, Moran, now in a state that is unrecognizable from his former, rational self, describes returning home from his journey and beginning to write the report the reader is reading: “I have spoken of a voice telling me things…It did not use the words that Moran had been taught…It told me to write the report…Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not
raining” (170). This act of denarration brings the narrative’s end full circle to meet its beginning, but also calls the entire narrative into question.

Richardson’s concept of the permeable narrator, meaning “the uncanny and inexplicable intrusion of the voice of another within the narrator’s consciousness…[that] threatens to violate the principle of an autonomous, individual consciousness” (95) makes clear the way in which Beckett’s narrators challenge the conception of the individual subject that has been fundamental to the form of the novel. Richardson demonstrates how the “alien” voice progresses through the Trilogy, starting with the “voice” Molloy hears, which can easily be interpreted as his ego or conscience. Moran hears voices of other Beckett characters, violating the ontology of the fiction.

The Unnamable starts at this point, beginning with the question of the nature and identity of the narrator. His would seem to be an unfinished subject trapped in a limbo of characters, or else he is like an author, looking down on his creations, except they are not his creations, but Beckett’s. Every conceptual opposition, every statement of difference, is immediately collapsed or negated. The Unnamable has been called one of the most defiantly anti-narrative works ever composed, in that all the basic elements of storytelling are negated. There is no determinable temporal or spatial setting, no characters in the traditional sense, no events worth narrating, and no clear audience or motive for the narration. The driving force of the text is the compulsive voice that will not stop, and its primary drama is the determination of the identity of the narrator and its voices. The text gestures to possible clues as to the identity of The Unnamable’s narrator, but the only certainty is what it is not. When the narrator of The Unnamable says “it’s not I
speaking,” he is trying to move away from the first person to the third person, from the self to something other.

As Simon Critchley points out, the voice that narrates in Beckett’s work is not the “I” of the author or a controlling consciousness, but rather the “Not I,” the negation of the individual. Through the negation of the individual subject, Beckett undoes one of the primary functions of suture: constantly re-interpellating the subject into the same discursive positions, giving the illusion of a stable identity. Benveniste states that the signifier “I,” which has no stable signified, does not create meaning through reference to an actual speaker, but rather through association with an idealized image in which the speaker sees himself. Benveniste conceptualizes signification in terms of a gap between the speaking subject and the subject of speech (or utterance). Kaja Silverman explains this phenomenon:

In ordinary conversational situations, the speaking subject…automatically connects up the pronouns “I” and “you” with those mental images of by means of which it recognizes both itself and the person to whom it speaks, and it identifies with the former of these. However, when a subject reads a novel or views a film it performs only one of these actions, that of identification. The representations within which we recognize ourselves are clearly manufactured elsewhere, at the point of the discourse’s origin. (197)

If, as Adorno suggests, “Identity is the primary form of ideology” (Negative, 148), then Beckett’s negation of every possible category of identity leaves no space for the ideology of the individual to exist. The notion of the self is entirely undermined. The permeable narrator of The Unnamable is, in Richardson’s own words, “perhaps the most thoroughgoing negation of the
humanistic concept of a narrator who is like a person, since it violates the most important aspect of personhood, which at least since Descartes has been conceived as a mind…the very possibility of a unitary self is exploded” (102). If in the novel, as an art form that reflects bourgeois self-understanding, the first-person narrator can be said to stand in for both the author and the subject with whom the reader identifies, *The Unnamable* represents the breakdown of both.

What place, then, can textual pleasure have in the post-war era, where logic, progress, and the very concept of the individual have been liquidated? Beckett’s novels require us to rethink what we experience as pleasurable in literature. Their lack of relatable character and identifiable plot would seem to preclude traditional narrative pleasures of identification and closure. The narrating voice of *The Unnamable*, who can scarcely be called a character, represents the complete and utter absence of a developed individual or even a first-person pronoun with whom the reader might identify. However, even the total absence of an identifiable character cannot keep the reader from identifying with this entity’s struggle for meaning and expression. Because the story’s *telos*, in the form of meaning of closure, cannot be reached, Beckett’s novels force us to find pleasure in the process, the journey, and the search for meaning. Much like Moran’s beehive, of which he says, “with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life and never understand” (163), Beckett’s novels encourage us to learn to live in the space of not knowing. Beckett's prose acknowledges the horror of existence in a world that seems to have lost order and meaning. And yet, the characters cannot deny the very human impulse to tell stories and attempt to create order out of chaos. We identify with Beckett's characters in their attempts to build something out of the rubble of their world. In spite of the utter hopelessness of
their situation, in which society seems to be devolving, they continue in the only way they know how— they continue to be, to exist, and to go on.

_The Unnamable_ represents the end of the novel, of the individual, and of narration as we know it. And yet, the voice continues to speak. In the absence of time, space, identity, and meaning, Beckett emphasizes the impossibility—and the necessity—of words and stories. As the vast, infinite space of existence must somehow be filled, and the speaker (and the reader’s) unquenchable thirst for meaning must be accommodated, the only option that remains is to continue to speak. For the narrating voice of _The Unnamable_, to speak is to exist. Words are the only thing that allows him to exist, and nonexistence is, paradoxically, impossible. The voice is, therefore, compelled to speak, however non-sensically, forever:

You must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me,
until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps
it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they
have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that
opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I,
it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in
the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on (407).
CHAPTER II

“MY DISTANT GOLDEN GOAL”: TEXTUAL DESIRE AND THE POLITICS OF CLOSURE IN

NABOKOV’S LOLITA

While Vladimir Nabokov’s novels address some of the same concerns as Beckett’s, they do so in very different ways. The experience of reading one of Nabokov’s novels is closer to the experience of reading a truly realist novel, in that his novels complicate the dichotomy between realist novel and metafiction, through the combination of his engrossing prose style and his texts’ constant insistence on their own fictive nature. In the Foreword to Nabokov’s infamous and controversial novel Lolita, the fictional “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D” asserts:

If…an editor attempted to dilute or omit scenes that a certain type of mind might call ‘aphrodisiac’…one would have to forego the publication of ‘Lolita’ altogether, since those very scenes that one might ineptly accuse of a sensuous existence of their own, are the most strictly functional ones in the development of a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis (4-5).

While the book’s “moral apotheosis” is perhaps questionable, the fictional commentator’s point holds—if the novel’s scenes of erotic tension, expectation, torment, and ultimate release were edited out, the essence of the text that has made it fertile ground for debate and interpretation by generations of readers and critics would be lost. Lolita, as a story of all-consuming desire, has variously been interpreted as an apology for vice or an encouragement of virtue, a purely technical exercise in linguistic virtuosity or a profoundly human story of love and loss, as an
example of art for its own sake or a as deeply humanist moral statement. While much has been said about Nabokov’s portrayal of physical desire, *Lolita* is also a work about the way *textual* desire compels the act of reading: how subject identification induces textual pleasure, which drives the reader’s desire for closure. The dominant voice of Humbert Humbert, the novel’s hero, villain, and narrator, is in equal parts captivating and controlling, demonstrating that captivation and control are two sides of the same coin. Nabokov’s engaging prose style and the force of his narrative seduce the reader to identify with Humbert and anticipate the realization of his desires. The textual problem generated by an incomplete narrative is resolved at the moment of closure, provoking the reader to share Humbert’s pleasure at the achievement of his goal. This textual pleasure implicates the reader in Humbert’s actions. In this way, the novel provides both an immensely pleasurable experience and an assault on the act of reading.

Many studies of the politics of narration, such as Richard Pearce’s *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf*, focus on the specific characteristics of a character-narrator—his maleness, or whiteness, or upper-class status—that cause him to make problematic assumptions about the homogeneity of his audience and its values. Pearce observes, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, that “the authorial voice is imperialistic...It is exploitative. It strives for power, control, homogeneity, conversion, and closure” (23). The implication here is that, by displaying a plurality of contrasted voices rather than one authoritative voice, the modernist text can resist this drive toward exploitation. However, the modernist writer’s awareness of the ideological implications of the authorial voice, seen in his use of devices such as polyvocal narration, does not fully erase these ideological
implications from his writing. By presenting the illusion of a text that has been stripped of a controlling, subjective voice, this modernist narrative style denies the author’s point of view that still exists in the text. My analysis instead examines what a form of narration, at a basic structural level, says about the way that authority operates, both within a text and in society: through the exclusion of other voices. By questioning the authority of a narrative voice that presents itself as representative of an unfiltered authorial consciousness, rather than as a text created by a narrator who is aware he is narrating and conscious of his power over the reader, I hope to examine the way that ideology operates by presenting itself as always-existing and “natural,” rather than constructed.

Ideological critiques of narrative style tend to distinguish between the Brechtian anti-realist text that defies the reader’s desire for narrative closure, disallowing what we might call textual pleasure, and the realist text that disguises its constructed nature to encourage subject identification, thereby compelling the reader’s irrational emotional investment. In Lolita, Nabokov complicates this dichotomy through, first, his seductive prose style and then the text’s constant insistence on its own fictive nature. In this way, Nabokov uses the reader’s emotional response to create an intellectual response. Nabokov’s novels challenge the way that pleasure is constructed in the text by first inviting the reader to be caught up by Nabokov’s masterful prose and a compelling plot that provokes the reader’s desire for narrative closure. This pleasure is then complicated by the manner in which the text calls attention to itself as a fiction, inducing the reader to acknowledge that he has been made to identify with, and share in the pleasure of, a pedophile in the act of raping a child. Nabokov claims that his work is not political. He says that
“Lolita has no moral in tow,” and his only goal is “aesthetic bliss” (314). Nabokov’s novels can be intensely pleasurable for the reader, but what are the moral and political implications of this problematic pleasure? In this paper, I examine how Nabokov troubles the textual pleasure found in identifying with a character, sharing his experiences, and participating in his quest for narrative closure. In order to answer these questions through a reading of *Lolita*, I examine how the text’s self-conscious authorial narration functions to alternately encourage and to disallow subject identification. Further, I explore how the novel’s emphasis on its status as text calls attention to the way that the parody of narrative closure works on the reader. I identify three elements in the process that compel textual desire: narrative authority, identification, and closure. The authoritative narratorial voice compels subject identification, inducing the reader to participate in the protagonist’s drive towards closure, which is found in the attainment of the object of desire.

The text of *Lolita* purports to be the memoir of accused murderer Humbert Humbert, written from his jail cell, about the adolescent object of his desire, Dolores, nicknamed “Lolita.” Throughout the novel, Humbert directly addresses the reader, imploring the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (9) to understand his motivations and not to judge his actions too harshly.

The first glimmers of *Lolita* can be seen in Nabokov’s early novella *The Enchanter*, written in Russian in 1939 but not published until after Nabokov’s death, which features a similar plot and similar characters: the seducer and the nymphet. The major stylistic difference between the two texts is the shift, from third person narration in *The Enchanter*, to first in *Lolita*. In this move, Nabokov constructs for himself the formidable challenge of creating a narrative voice that can
meaningfully and sympathetically relate the experiences of a possibly mad, possibly evil, certainly manipulative character in a way that allows the reader to identify with and feel empathy for the character. Humbert Humbert’s narration is punning and poetic, playfully allusive, and forcefully, seductively controlling.

Ideological critiques of narrative style tend to privilege a text that disallows the reader’s sense of identification with the characters in order to elicit an intellectual response, rather than a purely emotional one. According to this philosophy, a text that makes a claim of objectivity by not revealing its constructed nature exerts ideological influence over the reader through, in part, his identification with characters in the text. The narrative voice in *Lolita*, however, is controlling because of, not in spite of, its aggressively present narrator. Nabokov’s fist-person author-narrators distinguish his style from the high modernist narrative style of writers such as Henry James, which employs devices such as free indirect discourse and interior monologues, as an example of impressionistic narration that de-centers the text to express a form of literary agnosticism: the narrator who might have provided stability is absent. The effacement of the narrator in modernist texts is commonly accepted\(^2\) as a narrative style that creates a more objectively presented reality, free from the authoritative subjectivity of the author-narrator. However, I argue that this style of narration merely presents the *illusion* of objectivity by refusing to attribute its narration to a specific point of view.\(^3\) In *Lolita*, the aggressive presence of the narrator, as a stand-in for the author, foregrounds the act of telling that creates the story,

\(^2\) Pearce 22-23, among others

\(^3\) This statement is not a rejection of Bakhtin— *Lolita*, as all of Nabokov’s work, is a profoundly polyphonic and dialogic text.
emphasizing the constructed nature of the narrative. Rather than attempting to hide the source of narration, Nabokov throws it into stark relief by emphasizing the controlling discourse of his author-narrator. In this way he calls our attention to the voice behind the text, inviting us to question its source.

In his study of the ethics of narration in *Lolita*, James Phelan, using Mary Elizabeth Preston’s terms, identifies Humbert Humbert as a self-conscious authorial narrator (103-104). This means that Humbert is aware both of his role as a storyteller and of his agency in crafting the effects that story has on the reader. Phelan also demonstrates that Humbert makes a self-conscious effort to exercise aesthetic control, meaning “the narrator’s ability to achieve the effects he seeks and to have those effects endorsed by the implied author” (104). Phelan makes an important distinction between Humbert the *character*, who acts, at certain point in time, to use Dolores for his own physical pleasure, and Humbert the *narrator*, who tells the story of these actions at a later point in time, focalized through the earlier Humbert. There are, then, three levels of seduction in the novel: as Humbert the character “seduces” Dolores, Humbert the narrator beguiles the reader, his “ladies and gentlemen of the jury.” On the third level, the implied Nabokov, for whom Humbert the narrator acts as a stand-in, endeavors to enchant the reader as he alternately endorses and criticizes Humbert’s actions. In this way, Nabokov implicates his own prose in the act of manipulation. But, as Phelan observes (and I will demonstrate below), Humbert’s aesthetic control is only partial, allowing Nabokov’s prose to simultaneously signal readers to both participate in and reject this pleasure.
Throughout much of the novel, Humbert argues for his innocence using diverse, contradictory strategies, claiming at various points that events from his childhood are to blame for his proclivities, that Dolores did not fully understand his actions as sexual and so she remains innocent, that his sexual desire for Dolores was reciprocated, that no one who has not been in his position could possibly understand the purity and selflessness of his devotion. He argues that the prohibitions against an adult’s sexual desire for an adolescent—which, he explains at length, are culturally constructed—only speak to the depth and purity of his love for Dolores. Humbert’s rhetorical moves, when summarized as I have done here, are easy enough to see through. It speaks to Nabokov’s masterful prose that Humbert’s rhetoric seduces many readers, as is evidenced by the vast body of *Lolita* criticism that attempts to answer the question of whether the love Humbert claims to have for Dolores is sincere. The first words of Lionel Trilling’s review of the novel, titled “The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita,*” are “*Lolita* is about love,” a phrase he repeats twice more in the three sentences of his first paragraph (9). Trilling argues that Humbert’s relationship with Dolores represents a kind of courtly “passion-love” that has ceased to exist in contemporary Western society and, therefore, the contemporary novel. However, Trilling does not note that this is an argument Humbert himself makes to defend his actions, invoking Dante’s child-love Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura as predecessors to the pure love he holds for his Dolores. Nabokov’s rhetoric is persuasive because he invites the reader to identify with and understand Humbert’s desire in spite of the reader’s own moral stance. The sense of being dominated by the narrator, swept along by the force of his seductive prose, is in fact immensely pleasurable for the reader.
In the novel’s Foreword, a commentary by the fictional “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D” on the text of Humbert’s memoir, Ray uses multiple strategies—like those of Humbert’s various protestations—to attempt to explain and defend the text’s worth as an object of study:

This commentator may be excused for repeating what he has stressed in his own books and lectures, namely that ‘offensive’ is frequently but a synonym for ‘unusual’; and a great work of art is of course always original...I have no intention to glorify “H.H.” No doubt, he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy...A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book, while abhorring its author! (5)

Through the voice of John Ray, Jr., Nabokov anticipates much of the critical commentary that would follow the novel’s publication, both the condemnatory and the congratulatory. Ray’s protestations of “moral leprosy” seem to belie his clear admiration for Humbert’s “great work of art” and “diabolical cunning.” The use of the word “compassion” is also a misdirection, for Humbert’s “singing violin” conjures for the reader not empathy for Dolores, but rather a feeling of lust that the reader vicariously experiences.

The primary function of the foreword is, as with many fictional paratexts, to provide the text with a sense of authority and verisimilitude. Ray provides clues as to the identities, behind Humbert’s pseudonyms, to of the “‘real’ people beyond the ‘true’” story,” so that his readers may follow up on the events of the case in their local newspapers (4). He presents himself as an
expert, both on Humbert’s case and on the psychology of what he euphemistically calls “certain morbid states and perversions” (3). Through Ray, Nabokov parodies the moralizing psychoanalytic discourse that would search for an obvious moral in Lolita: “Still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson” (5). This ironic instruction to the reader sets up a tension between the Foreword and the body of the novel, between Ray and Humbert. While reason might dictate that the reader favor the opinions of a professional over the machinations of a madman he has been warned against believing, Ray’s prim moralizing encourages the reader to read against his instructions. Through the parodically authoritarian voice of John Ray, Jr., Ph.D, Nabokov directs the reader how to read the text, by instructing him how not to read the text.

As he signals the reader to reject the critical voice of John Ray that would seek to analyze and judge Humbert Humbert for his actions, Nabokov primes the reader to identify with Humbert. Much of the controversy surrounding the publication of Lolita, and much of the discomfort felt by readers, stem from the elements of the novel that encourage the reader to identify with a narrator who is also a pedophile. Accordingly, a significant amount of Lolita scholarship attempts to determine Nabokov’s motive in encouraging such identification. In Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov, Leland De la Durantaye expresses a common interpretation of Lolita, arguing that Nabokov’s project is to create empathy. He interprets Nabokov’s challenge to the reader as inducing an empathetic response to Humbert Humbert in defiance of social and moral prohibitions against doing so. De la Durantaye describes
Nabokov’s goal as “shift[ing]…the traditional poles of ethical response: the categorical and the conditional,” stating that “the conditional view reminds us that the life we live is never black and white and to understand it we need to see all its colorful exceptionality” (14). De la Durantaye is writing in response to critics who took one of two common paths in their response to Lolita: either denying outright the book’s value as art, or ignoring its moral difficulties in order to indulge in its “aesthetic bliss.” He reads Lolita as humanist explanation that actions are contingent on circumstances and that good and bad exist in all of us. De la Durantaye does not question Nabokov’s purpose in encouraging this identification. However, rather than simply inducing in its readers a feeling of empathy, the complex metafictional structure of Nabokov’s text calls attention to the manner in which empathy and, therefore, identification are created in the realist novel. In Lolita, the voice of the self-conscious authorial narrator foregrounds the act of telling, allowing the reader to recognize the manner in which the text compels an empathetic response. The reader’s awareness of these textual functions compels him to resist unconscious identification and, instead, examine the text’s effect on his emotional response.

This focus on the process that creates the reader’s emotional response complicates the textual pleasures found in the realist novel. In his book Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire, David Packman’s analysis examines the way that Nabokov’s texts foreground their constructed status to pose a problem of reading. Packman states that, in Nabokov’s novels, “the desire represented thematically in the text mirrors the reader’s desire for the text; this doubling calls the reader’s attention to his own activity, resulting in a subversion of the fictive world” (1). He substantiates this claim, in the case of Lolita, through a careful explication of two
strains of desire in the novel: the desire for knowledge, seen in the plot’s parody of a detective narrative; and the desire for closure, mirrored in Humbert’s physical desire for orgasm. Packman invokes Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shlovsky’s distinction between story and plot in order to explain the way that detective fiction works to create textual anxiety and, ultimately, closure. Information that is crucial to the story is repressed from the plot in order to create suspense. In the case of Lolita, this withheld knowledge is the name of the man who steals Dolores away from Humbert in the novel’s second half, causing Humbert to go on a quest for clues to the man’s identity in a parodic form of the detective novel. Humbert’s process of gathering clues and searching for an answer to this enigma mirrors the reader’s own experience of reading the text. Packman emphasizes the teleological character of detective fiction—as expectation, desire, and the guarantee of a “truth” that would allow narrative closure—drive the reader to continue reading. The solution to the enigma—here, the name of Quilty—creates a return to order and the resolution of anxieties raised by the text.

However, Humbert the narrator withholds this information from the reader when the name is ultimately revealed to him (274), prolonging and provoking the reader’s desire. In this way, Nabokov problematizes the conventions of hermeneutic narrative, creating a literary game at the site of interplay between the text and its audience. Humbert Humbert, in addition to acting as both narrator and as a character within his own fiction, also serves as a parodic double for the reader. As Humbert attempts to “read” the textual clues left for him by Quilty in hotel registries across the country, he mirrors the reader’s attempt to interpret the enigmas planted throughout Nabokov’s text. However, Quilty’s literary clues do not lead to a final signified—the object of
Humbert’s desire, the identity of the man who stole Dolores—but instead lead only to other signifiers, other literary references and textual clues, that suggest the fundamentally reflexive nature of literature.

Packman observes that the reader’s desire for the text is mirrored at the diegetic level in Humbert Humbert’s erotic desires. The classic Aristotelian narrative is constructed in a linear manner to draw the reader towards the end in a continuous way, causing him to desire the flow of the narrative to remain uninterrupted. The first instance of sexual and textual release occurs when Humbert uses Dolores’s body that is sprawled across his lap to masturbate himself to orgasm. As he sets the scene, Humbert’s narration directly implicates the reader in his tension and its ultimate resolution:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we had, “impartial sympathy.” So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me. (57)

As in the Foreword by John Ray, Jr., the reader is instructed how to read: with “impartial sympathy,” as though sympathy could truly be impartial. Humbert implicates the reader through the words “participate” and “us,” placing the reader alongside him in the progression from the scene’s opening towards the moment of closure. Humbert flatters the “learned” reader, asking for compassion as he begins his “difficult job.”

Humbert begins his description of the incident by setting the scene as in a play, listing as the main character “Humbert the Hummer,” making himself into a character and thereby
removing his agency from the act he describes. He describes the time, place, and a list of props, including the “candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks” before he finally finds Dolores among a list of “mementoes” flung about the room (57). She is not a character in this story, acting of her own will, but rather an object, a memento, to be acted upon. Humbert describes the apple Dolores holds as “Eden-red,” identifying the young girl with the biblical temptress Eve who causes man’s downfall. Humbert distracts Dolores from his act of masturbation by singing the words of a popular song in a manner he describes as “mechanical” and “automatic” (60). This word choice alludes to both an evolutionary view of the male sex drive, suggesting that it cannot be held to moral standards, and to the scientific nature of cause and effect, implying that Humbert cannot be held responsible for his actions because once their progression has begun, they cannot be stopped.

As Humbert’s sexual excitement grows, so does the reader’s narrative excitement. The flow of the narration becomes rhythmic and staccato, a series of clauses that together become one extended, unbroken sentence, as though the narrative voice is breathing quickly and heavily. Humbert describes his “anxiety,” stating that he was “mortally afraid that some act of God might interrupt me” in pursuit of his “distant golden goal” (59). This goal, the object of desire for both Humbert and the reader, represents the resolution of desire ending in climax. As Humbert fears that he might be stopped in his path towards his goal, so does the narrative fear its own interruption, compelling the reader to fear it also. Packman states that the narrative “elicits the reader’s expectation and desire by generating suspense, a tactic of the structure of desire” (52).
This desire is set into play by the scene’s narrative procedures as mirrored in its explicit subject matter.

As the textual anxieties described above begin to progress towards resolution, the reader experiences a sense of relief analogous to Humbert’s:

All of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses…What had begun as a delicious distention of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that state of absolute security, confidence, and reliance not to be found elsewhere in conscious life. (60)

As the approach of closure in the form of orgasm is assured, the flow of the text changes, from the “tense, tortured” feeling of Humbert’s “laboring” to his sense of “security” and “confidence.” Basking in this sense of certainty, now both Humbert and Nabokov can take their time: Humbert slows down in order to “prolong the glow.” The text’s language slows back to its original leisurely pace, describing Humbert’s machinations with the words “ready,” “postponing,” “suspended” (60), allowing the reader to fully share Humbert’s anticipation of his approaching goal that promises to solve the textual problem of the incomplete narrative.

As critics from Aristotle to Roland Barthes have observed, the ending is the element of a story that allow readers to attribute meaning to a sequence of narrative events. In his essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin states that endings, in the form of the ultimate authority of death, give narratives their significance (93-94). In his study of narrative desire, Reading for the Plot, Peter Brooks builds on Benjamin’s observation, remarking that beyond the pleasure principle lies the death instinct (102). Closure represents the death of story through the petit mort of the
orgasm, a metaphor that Nabokov depicts literally in the scene described above. Closure, and the narrative’s drive towards it, also provide one of the most powerful and most emotional pleasures of the text. The scene described above is one of the more difficult in the novel, as it is the first moment in which Humbert reaches sexual release. The reader experiences the buildup of anxiety, both erotic and textual, and ultimate relief through Humbert’s eyes. The force of the narrative causes the reader to desire, along with Humbert, that his operations continue uninterrupted. As the narrative moves from “anxiety” to “security,” the textual problem generated by an incomplete narrative is resolved at the moment of closure, provoking the reader to share Humbert’s pleasure at the achievement of his goal. By mirroring the reader’s desire for narrative climax with Humbert’s desire for sexual climax, the text implicates the reader in Humbert’s actions.

Nabokov’s assertion that his work’s only goal is “aesthetic bliss” is, then, more complex than it first appears. His goal is not merely to create in his reader a sense of unthinking ecstasy, but rather to explore the concept of textual pleasure: the manner in which the pleasures of identification are created in the realist novel and challenged in the metafictional text, the way that textual desire mirrors physical desire in its drive towards resolution, and the powerful effects such desires and pleasures have on the reader. Through the metafictional elements of Lolita, Nabokov directs the reader’s attention to the voice through which the story is told, and ultimately to his own experience of textual pleasure. This focus on the mechanics of desire in the text allows the reader to question the source of these pleasures. By problematizing textual pleasure,
Nabokov cautions his reader to be aware of the power of compelling narrative and the desires it provokes.
CHAPTER III

“THE GENTLE EMINENCE OF OLD NOVELS”: ILLUSION, ALLUSION, AND THE POLITICS OF POSTMODERN PLAY IN NABOKOV’S *ADA, OR ARDOR*

Nabokov continues his examination of textual pleasure in his 1969 novel, *Ada, or Ardor.* *Ada* is a novel about novels, and a book-lover’s book. The novel is highly mimetic, but in a way that calls attention to its own artifice through persistent literary allusions and references. These allusions and constant reference to novelistic convention are what makes the novel mimetic and readable, and also what challenges its easy readability. The characters—the hero-narrator Van, his lover (and secretly his sister) Ada—exist in a universe that, to the reader, seems most real when it is most familiar, thanks to Nabokov’s play with codes and conventions of literature that make the novel seem as though the reader has read it before. These real-seeming moments are, however, also the most self-consciously fictional. The universe of *Ada* is a literary universe, and all of its referents are other fictions. This serves to make the world of the novel both familiar and impenetrable. *Ada* operates on two levels: as a beautifully written, sweepingly romantic tale, and as an investigation and critique of its own genre. Thanks, in part, to its metafictional and intertextual qualities, *Ada, or Ardor* is, in the postmodern tradition, both a parody of and a tribute to the realist romantic novel.

Thanks to the novel’s contradictory nature as both highly stylized, yet mimetic, it serves as an interesting example of Barthes’s text of pleasure. Barthes’s assertion:
Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic, it is the gap between them that becomes so…

it is not violence that impresses pleasure; destruction does not interest it; what it desires is

the site of a loss, a seam, a cut, a deflation, the dissolve that seizes the reader at the

moment of ecstasy. (7)

implies that textual pleasure depends on the possibility of finding ecstatic moments in

comfortable, readerly texts, or else in making the ecstatic, writerly text readable enough that its

violent, disruptive effects can be felt. Ada, or Ardor is a useful case for my examination of the

way that pleasure is created both in the realist novel and in its metafictional counterpart.

As a novel about the novel form, Nabokov’s Ada has been maligned4 as elitist, hermetic,

and narcissistic, devoid of any larger investigation into the workings of humanity and society. As

its subject matter concerns a well-heeled, cultivated couple from an aristocratic family in the

fictional world of Antiterra, Ada would not seem to have anything to say about ideology or

modern Western class structure. But it is a novel about how novels make us who we are, as a

society and as individuals, and how ideological assumptions about the role of the individual

shape modern society. In Ada, Nabokov demonstrates how conventions of the realist novel

influence the reader’s emotional response, and therefore his moral evaluations and decisions.

Nabokov attempts to overcome the limits of realist representation in the traditional novel by

using the reader’s ingrained emotional response to novelistic conventions of narration,

identification, and closure, as well as generic conventions of the romance, to create an

intellectual response. Through his parody of the nineteenth-century romantic novel, Nabokov investigates and critiques the ideology of the modern era that values the individual and his quest for romantic love above his duty to family and society.

David Packman characterizes the world created in *Ada* as hermetic and unconcerned with larger issues, stating that “Unlike its predecessors, *Ada* resists being taken for anything other than what it is: a rigorously reflexive enterprise,” and that “The fundamental preoccupation of the book is less the world than itself.” He reads the novel’s preoccupation with incestuous relationship as symbolic of its “literary narcissism” (90). Packman states that Antiterra, the science-fictional world of the novel, “defamiliarizes” the world the reader knows, leaving him “on the outside looking in” (91). Packman invokes a distinction between “readability” and “unreadability,” explaining that the realist text represses its own textuality to allow for easy readability. He quotes Stephen Heath: “this readability is relayed by a series of codes and conventions, by the text already known and written: the work is readable, therefore…which repeats them in their naturalized transparence” (qtd. in Packman, 94). Conversely, the “unreadable” text, by contesting illusion, prohibits the “narrative euphoria,” in Jean Ricardou’s term, found in the “readable” realist text. Nabokov foregoes the narrative euphoria provided by the realist text by choosing instead to interrogate the codes and conventions of literary realism. Packman also examines the way that *Ada* questions verisimilitude in the novel by calling attention to “the breach between the representation and the represented” (96). He analyzes multiple ways in which Nabokov’s frequent references to literary history and novelistic structure
call attention to the manner in which texts exist within an intertextual network, again violating the conventions of the realist novel.

Packman’s analysis of Ada focuses on the text’s metafictional quality, its subversion of realist codes and conventions and its insistence upon the text as text, as a sort of didactic project. He defends Ada against critics such as John Updike, who says the book has “the stale air of classic novels” and complains that the characters are unlikable, and Alfred Kazin, who criticizes the novel’s “intellectual showiness,” calling it “a brilliant bore” (qtd. in Packman, 94). However, he fails to explain why Ada is interesting as anything more than an academic exercise, causing the novel to seem showy and boring indeed. While Packman’s conception of the novel’s metafictional project is invaluable for my analysis, he disregards the reader’s identification with the characters and the novel’s attendant pleasures that make the act of reading Ada more than an intellectual exercise. He does not acknowledge some of the larger concerns raised by Nabokov’s focus on these literary codes. This relationship to metafiction is the topic I hope to address in this chapter.

In Ada, as in Lolita, Nabokov complicates the process that creates textual pleasure by drawing the reader’s attention to this process. In Ada, Nabokov does this by revealing the generic literary codes that create meaning in the realist novel. The intertextual elements in Ada code the novel, and its hero-narrator, as romantic, in such a subtle way that it may not be noticed on the first reading. These literary codes influence the reader’s emotional reactions, and therefore his moral judgments. While these codes are implicit in the realist novel, in Ada Nabokov makes these codes and their effect on the reader’s moral judgment, if not explicit, then
visible to the careful reader. The text’s self-conscious authorial narration functions to alternately encourage and to disallow subject identification. The novel’s emphasis on its status as text calls attention to the way that its parody of narrative closure works on the reader.

A vast body of work exists that examine intertextuality, metafictionality, and postmodern aesthetic play in a theoretical context. In order to put these theories in to social and political context by examining the potential of the postmodernist metafiction to overcome the limits of realist representation, I will turn now to the debate on the politics of postmodern play. The form of parody in Ada is a particularly postmodern one, as it relies not only on formal novelistic conventions, but also on allusion to and direct quotation from a vast number of previous texts from the history of modern literature. In her essay “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” Linda Hutcheon responds to Frederic Jameson’s criticism of postmodern aesthetics, Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Jameson argues that postmodern art is marked by pastiche, rather than parody, as parody requires a grounding in cultural norms in order to make its political point. According to Jameson, pastiche is the quotation and juxtaposition of different aesthetics taken out of their historical context, without any commentary or moral judgment. Pastiche, as parody devoid of satire, lacks the political quality that made parody subversive.

Using the example of architecture, the art form in which the term postmodern originated, Hutcheon argues for the ideological and social value of parodic postmodern play. She states that Jameson misunderstands parody as “blank” and “random,” and redefines parody as “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of
similarity” (185). In response to Jameson’s condemnation of postmodernist aesthetics for failing to offer “genuine historicity,” Hutcheon states that postmodernism “teaches and enacts the recognition of the fact that social, historical, and existential ‘reality’ is discursive reality when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only ‘genuine historicity’ becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity” (182). In order to demonstrate how irony and parody inform postmodernist architecture’s social and political purpose, Hutcheon traces the history of modernist architecture in the twentieth century. As modernist architects conceived of their work as universal and transhistorical, “Faith in the rational, scientific mastery of reality implicitly—then explicitly—denied the inherited, evolved cultural continuity of history” (188). Hutcheon outlines several theories that conceive of postmodern architecture as a return to historicity, with the acknowledgement that history cannot be fully, directly, or unproblematically known or represented.

Additionally, postmodern parody is concerned with the act of telling: “Postmodernist parody, be it in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music, uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse” (204). Postmodernism, in both architecture and literature, “is marked by an increase in accessibility and didacticism…As such, it can work to stop us from accepting discourse naively, and force us to look to the social ideologies of which we are the products and in which we live, perceive, and create” (200). In the case of Ada, the “social ideologies” Nabokov examines are those espoused by the nineteenth-century European novel he parodies: romanticism, strict class structures, and the glorification of the individual above the communal.
These ideologies are represented in the character Van, the romantic hero who the reader only recognizes as flawed when the reader recognizes Nabokov’s parody of these tropes. Hutcheon’s argument recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s statement, in “Discourse in the Novel”:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue (276).

These “utterances” include not just spoken statements, but also artistic, literary, and cultural forms used to create meaning, from the play with classical forms in architecture to the romantic discourse Nabokov borrows. By distancing these utterances from their historical moment, practitioners of postmodern parody are able to more clearly examine the “social ideologies” in which these forms originated. I would like now to look more closely at the specific social ideologies Nabokov critiques in Ada.

In The Rise of the Novel, Ian Watt demonstrates that that individualism and romantic love are both modern concepts that came to prominence alongside the rise of realism in the novel. He begins his study with an overview of the contemporary philosophies of Descartes and Locke, major contributors to the intellectual environment that allowed the novel to flourish. Descartes’s Discourse on Method and Meditations were influential in popularizing “the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent from the tradition of past thought, and indeed as more likely to be arrived at by a departure from it” (13). Instead of plots based on mythology, history, legend, or previous literature, as were
common in classical literature, authors of the novel began to write original plots that focused on the individual’s experience. This shift in subject matter reflects the social and philosophical reorientation that occurred in the eighteenth century, in which the individual’s experience of reality began to be valued over what had been thought to be timeless or universal. Watt states that Defoe’s “total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes’s cogito ergo sum was in philosophy” (15). The action of the plot consists of the development of a character over time: “The novel’s plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action” (22), representing both causality in narrative and character development. The 19th-century European novel, as a literary form, attempts to represent an individual’s experience of life with as much verisimilitude as possible. The rise of the novel is, then, the rise of realism.

The values espoused—and perpetuated—by the 18th century novel are the values that would come to define the modern era. These values include rationalism and scientific empiricism: “Modern realism…begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (12), also seen in the conventions of novelistic causation. The specificity of character in the novel, as described above, represents the value of individualism, as best seen in Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Individualism, a word that dates from the mid-nineteenth century, suggests, as Watt says,

a whole society mainly governed by the idea that every individual’s intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past
modes of thought and action denoted by the word “tradition”—a force that is always social, not individual. (60)

The development of individualism in modern Western society, which Watt attributes to the rise of industrial capitalism and the spread of Protestantism, leads to the concept of the individual as seen in Romantic thought, as exemplified in the heroes of the novels Nabokov parodies. While Robinson Crusoe’s individualism allows him to pursue financial gain while disregarding the fate of his family and his society, the individual in the romantic novel pursues his romantic destiny despite social prohibitions. While Watt focuses on the English novel of the 18th century, the ideologies espoused in the realist novel reached their apotheosis in the 19th century novel. The novel, as it concerns the development of the individual over time, represents the most deeply ingrained values of the modern era. The novel was also influential in disseminating these values as literacy spread, helping to create the modern bourgeois class. Nabokov’s parody of the realist novel, as conceived by Hutcheon, cannot help but call attention to these ideologies. The individual’s quest for romantic love against social and moral strictures, as seen in the 18th and 19th century novel, are the “social ideologies” of the novel revealed by Nabokov’s formal parody.

In Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness, Brian Boyd demonstrates Nabokov’s conscious use of literary codes to influence the reader’s moral judgment. Boyd states that the reader’s participation in the act of creating meaning “may offer us…the surprise of being forced to recognize our own errors of moral perception” (5). Boyd analyzes a scene in which Van, who is about to leave Ardis Manor at the end of the summer for boarding school, bids farewell to his lover (and sister) Ada. The Veen family butler, Bouteillan, is to drive Van in the family car to the
railway station, but en route, Van takes control of the car and asks Bouteillan to wait while he meets Ada for one last secret tryst at Forest Fork. A dramatic scene follows, in which Van asks Ada to remain faithful to him, and she replies “Oh dear, don’t ask me, there’s a girl in my school who is in love with me…” Van tells her that “The girls don’t matter…it’s the fellows I’ll kill if they come near you” (Nabokov, 158-159). After a last embrace, Van flees and does not look back. The scene ends:

Stumbling on melons, fiercely beheading the tall arrogant fennels with his riding crop, Van returned to Forest Fork. Morio, his favorite black horse, stood waiting for him, held by young Moore. He thanked the groom with a handful of stellas and galloped off, his gloves wet with tears. (159)

This scene demonstrates, firstly, the way that Ada can be read on two levels. To the casual reader, the passage above reads as a traditional romantic tale, as it paints a colorful picture of the end of an idyllic Ardis summer and demonstrates the young Van’s passionate love for Ada and pain at parting from her. However, as Boyd points out, the passage raises a number of urgent questions for the observant reader—most immediately, what has happened to Bouteillan and the car? Where did Van’s “favorite black horse” and “the young Moore” come from? The language of the passage suggests that the reader should know these characters, that they have been previously established in the novel, but the reader has forgotten them or did not notice their earlier appearance. However, the black horse and the young Moore do not appear anywhere else in the novel. Boyd states that the horse and the boy are, instead, figments of Van the narrator’s imagination that allow him to paint himself as a romantic hero: “The young groom, the black
horse and Van galloping off provide a much more fitting atmosphere for the fierceness of passionate separation than a family car and an old bald butler” (7). This passage serves not only to highlight Van’s unreliability and overblown sense of himself as a romantic hero, as Boyd demonstrates. It is also an example of one of the many ways that Nabokov consciously plays with the reader’s sense of generic expectation, of what can and should occur in a romantic tale. The reader who is swept away by the force of the story accepts this lack of continuity without noticing the change, because his familiarity with generic literary codes makes the appearance of Van’s horse and his romantic, galloping escape logical, even inevitable.

Nabokov’s use of generic literary codes to influence the reader’s moral judgment is most immediately visible in the way he depicts Van and Ada’s often-cruel treatment of their younger sister, Lucette. As the novel is told primarily from Van’s point of view with occasional asides from Ada, the reader is encouraged to see Lucette as they do: as an irritating obstacle in the way of their exceptional love: “Lucette, the shadow, followed them from lawn to loft, from greenhouse to stable, from a modern shower booth near the pool to the ancient bathroom upstairs. Lucette-in-the-Box came out of a trunk. Lucette desired they take her for walks. Lucette insisted on their playing ‘leaptoad’ with her—and Ada and Van exchanged dark looks” (213). As Van and Ada are both extremely precocious (in their own memories, at least,) the sweet but perfectly ordinary Lucette cannot keep up with their puns, anagrams, and wordplay.

Lucette’s presence thwarts the reader’s own desire to see Van and Ada together, encourages reader to identify with them when they cruelly dismiss her. In comparison to the two
exceptional young people’s love for each other, Lucette does not seem worthy of their time or affection. And so the two frequently conspire to be rid of her, at least long enough to consummate their passion. Lucette is sent away to her governess. Under the pretense of a game of hide-and-seek, Lucette is locked in a closet (used for storing “bound copies of The Kaluga Waters”) long enough for the lovers to indulge in an assignation. However, as the novel progresses, Nabokov uses a variety of strategies to subtly communicate to the reader that Van and Ada are wrong to disregard Lucette’s feelings. The associations between water and incarceration abound for poor Lucette, as Ada forces her to stay in the “liquid prison” of a hot bath: “don’t you dare to get out of this nice warm water until the bell rings or you’ll die” (144). Lucette’s death by drowning, and its connection to Van and Ada’s dismissal of their sister in favor of each other, is prominently foreshadowed in a scene where the three siblings are playing alongside the brook. Lucette’s rubber doll is swept away by the current, and Van dives in to retrieve it. Ada and Van then trick an unwilling Lucette into playing a fairytale game involving a dragon and knight, with Lucette as the damsel in distress, tied up to a tree. Van and Ada scamper off to enjoy a moment to themselves, only later discovering that Lucette escaped from her bounds and saw their furtive lovemaking. Many years later, when Lucette recounts to Van the ways in which her siblings ignored her hurt her deeply, the allusions to Hamlet make Lucette’s role as Ophelia, driven to madness and drowned, clear. Van later will imagine Lucette’s thoughts at the time of her death: “She did not see her whole life flash before her as we were all afraid she might have done; the red rubber of a favorite doll remained safely decomposed among the myosotes of an unanalyzable brook” (494).
Boyd describes Nabokov’s “moral strategy”—that he “encourages us to fail to make a necessary judgment, then by the controlled irony of recurrent patterns makes us suddenly aware how readily we could make a moral blunder” (40). Boyd exposes, through a close reading of the passage describing Van’s departure quoted above, allusions to Marvell and Rimbaud that reveal an intricate system of symbolism surrounding the character Lucette and her siblings’ callous disregard for her feelings. Nabokov invokes Rimbaud’s “Mémoire” repeatedly to demonstrate that exposure to her siblings’ physical experimentation initiated Lucette prematurely into the sexual realm. The “robes vertes” of the girls in Rimbaud’s poem are seen in the “green nightgown” Lucette wears a version of throughout the novel (64). The imagery of the virgin martyr Joan of Arc in the first stanza of “Mémoire” in echoed as Lucette is tied to a tree and forced to endure her siblings’ cruelty. Boyd also offers a compelling analysis of the prominence of incestuous relationships in Ada. Incest was a common theme in Romantic literature, as it represented the ultimate act of individual rebellion against social mores. D. Barton Johnson describes the act of incest as the triumph of irrational nature over rational society, stating that the theme of incest encapsulates “the major polar opposition that structures Romanticism: the individual versus society. Rebellion suggests a liberating chaos…solipsism, the ultimate regeneration of the individual within himself” (245). However, Van and Ada’s incestuous love serves a dual purpose in Ada. Boyd states that the theme of incest functions to “stress the intimate interconnections between people’s lives, interconnections which impose upon human life all the obligations of moral responsibility” (104). Boyd points out that the novel’s playful and prominent allusions to Chateaubriand, the father of French Romanticism whose novella René
had similar themes of a sister’s incestuous passion for her brother, along with its apparent acceptance of a modern standard of sexual freedom without responsibility, would seem to encourage an unserious approach to incest. However, as Boyd’s close reading of Ada’s intertexts again reveals, this is another of Nabokov’s strategies that causes the reader to dismiss the hero’s, and his own, moral responsibility in favor of the text’s romantic pleasures. Only after Lucette succumbs to her terrible fate is the reader’s failure in moral judgment revealed—unless the reader, like Boyd, recognizes Nabokov’s textual clues. While the text, at the level on which it functions as a conventional romance, encourages the reader to view Van and Ada as romantic heroes, a closer reading of its allusions and play with literary codes reveals a hidden critique of their moral failings, and by extension, of the reader’s failed judgment. Nabokov uses the reader’s sense of generic expectation—that a romantic hero strives for true love against the constraints of society, and that he is to be commended for it—to critique the reader’s willingness to identify with a character even in his insensitivity.

Hutcheon’s argument above, that postmodern play forces us to look closer at the “social ideologies” of our era recalls Bakhtin’s statement:

The image of such a language in a novel is the image assumed by a set of social beliefs, the image of a social ideologeme that has fused with its own discourse, with its own language. Therefore such an image is very far from being formalistic, and artistic play with such languages is far from being formalistic play. In the novel formal markers of languages, manners and styles are symbols for sets of social beliefs (357).
If, as Bakhtin demonstrates, discourse is ideological, then a form that analyzes its own discourse cannot help but analyze the ideologies that surround it and constitute it. Through his parody of the romantic novel, Nabokov is able to critique the ideologies the form represents and perpetuates. These ideologies are those of the bourgeois era: rationalism, individualism, and above all, romantic love, as pursued by the individual, even at the expense of the family and community. Texts such as *Ada* fit Barthes’ prescription, allowing the reader to experience textual pleasure while still challenging the literary and social codes that create them. The distancing function of metafiction allows the reader to see a text anew, and to question the social and political values that created it.
The tradition of the novel is one of realist representation, to the extent that moments where a text recognizes its own fictionality can be shocking. Novelist Henry James was famously appalled when he observed that Trollope, in the middle of a novel, “concedes to the reader that he and his trusting friend are only ‘making believe.’ He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give the narrative any turn that the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime” (31-32). James’s alarm at Trollope’s admission raises some interesting questions about the idea of the god-like, all-powerful, “sacred office” of the author, who according to James’s conception of fiction, must remain hidden to retain his sense of authority. What makes the act of telling a fictional story, and pretending that it is a series of actual events, “sacred”? If we are to put it in factual terms, Trollope’s admission of his story’s fictionality is, of course, true. James, by denying that his stories are his own invention, by pretending that they are a series of independently occurring events populated by real people who provide their own opinions on the action, is in fact telling an untruth.

The creation of fictional narratives is a deeply human phenomenon that allow us to create a story about ourselves, as a society and as individuals. The narratives that we create help us to explain to ourselves who we are and what events happened to get us there. These fictions are pleasurable, in part because they allow us to create a semblance of order and purpose in a world that often seems random and chaotic. These narratives help to create, reinforce, and perpetuate specific worldviews, allowing us to recognize ourselves in them. Additionally, we value the fictionality of fiction because it allows us to “lose ourselves” in a story, an experience that can be
deeply pleasurable. However, as I hope I have demonstrated, narrative can also be a powerful force for ideological coercion, especially when its operations remain concealed. Narrative manipulates the reader’s emotional reactions, which in turn influences his ethical judgments. The metafictional novels I have examined here attempt, using various strategies, to expose these processes by taking apart the narrative mechanisms that create meaning and emotional response, allows us to see them anew. Using the reader’s engrained response to novelistic codes and conventions, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov direct the reader’s attention to the voice(s) through which their stories are told, and ultimately to his own experience of reading and interpreting a text, reigniting a text’s awareness of itself as process and transforming the act of reading from passive consumption to production and play.
WORKS CITED


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